Overview

This paper attempts to briefly lay out an historical taxonomy of Lutheran denominations in North America, consisting of an orderly system of classification where individual constituents are categorized by the inherent qualities within groups and distinctions from others.

Toward a Lutheran Taxonomy

There are many groups today which, for a variety of reasons, assume the name “Christian” but are not. For the purposes of this discussion, Christianity will be construed to mean precisely those boundaries dictated by the Nicene Creed (to be very specific, the original, pre-filioque statement). Even the most restrictive use of the term by those groups universally, not controversially, acknowledged as Christian will accept this statement. For example, the Roman Catholic Church will declare other groups accepting the historical creeds to be “wounded” (in the words of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict in 2000) yet they are not considered beyond the pale of Christianity. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Latter Day Saints and other groups, while adopting the name “Christian” but completely alter the meaning of the term, rejecting standard usage as defined in the three Historical Creeds – Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian. Like the Albigensians of the late Middle Ages – not Christians at all but non-Christian Cathari - they aspire to the name “Christian” but can not claim support for this outside of their own communities, whether from Christians or even non-Christians.

Of the three Historical Creeds, all are valid but only the Nicene is well-suited to the particular task at hand: taxonomy. The Apostle’s Creed, as a Baptismal statement, is the most broad and least distinguishing. It is a personal, not a collective statement of belief. The Athanasian Creed sets its hand to a very specific task – establishing Trinitarian doctrine in clear and unmistakable terms; for all its volume, it is deep but not wide, without sufficient extent to serve as a general definition. In the words of Rupertus Meldenius (often quoted elsewhere and attributed to Augustine), “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things the sacrificial love of Christ shown to one another as if Christ Himself were the Lover, as if
Christ Himself were the Beloved”. (Yes, I know the usual word “Charity” has been vastly exploded here but there just isn’t an English equivalent anymore for the original “caritas”, standing in for the Greek αγάπη, and this is the best I can do. “Thee” used to serve in English but almost no one speaks in that manner any more today.) Only the Nicene Creed, created expressly created as a tool of distinction in order to hold up a general, all encompassing definition and rejecting specific heresies, serves the particular purpose of determining the “essential” of which the quote speaks and what is variation within Christianity.

This same process of classification may be applied to subgroups within Christianity as well. While the Anglicans refer to themselves as the Middle Way (via media) between Roman Catholicism and the Reformation, every other Christian sect on either side and even all non-Christian groups regard the Anglican Communion as a part of Protestant Churches in general. The “Anglican” Church of England does not differ substantively from, for example, the “Lutheran” Church of Sweden. When a taxonomy – an orderly system a classification by inherent qualities within groups and distinctions from others – is considered, Lutheran groups may be classified first as either Doctrinal, Congregational or Synodical.

Doctrinal Lutherans represent Lutheranism in the broadest sense, embracing many denominations beyond the traditional definition of the word. While differing in name and in the public perception, several denominations regard themselves as a part of a specifically Lutheran tradition beyond simply being descended from the Reformation. The term was applied to efforts reformers in England in the 1520’s, after the beginning of the Reformation on the Continent and before it’s sanctioning in Britain beginning in 1633. At this time, the “Lutheran” was used in English (derisively) of concepts rather than of persons. It is this identification with specific concepts that distinguishes – or demarks from – Doctrinal Lutherans. These other denominations, while maintaining their own separate identity and practices, are generally consonant with Augsburg Confession.

For example, Anglicans hold to a more formal liturgy, “High Church” vestments and a full Apostolic Succession while their Methodists descendants, general, do not. Yet, these particular matters are not divisive issues to Lutherans, who also embrace the same differing
views in one church. Growing up in the United Methodist Church, I often heard the Church referred as “Lutheran” in a broad sense of the word and this denomination gives clear expositions on the principles of the Augsburg Confessions in it’s official documents: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, by faith, and not for our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by faith only is a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort.” (United Methodist Church, “Book of Discipline”, section on “Articles of Religion”) Doctrinal Lutherans will also distances themselves from the same concepts rejected by Luther and his continental contemporaries, such as Believer’s Baptism of the Anabaptist and their descendants (Baptists and also Mennonites and Amish), “Strong” views of Pre-destination, such as the Double Predestination of many Calvinist sects including Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregationalist, and role of works in salvation as embraced by Fundamentalist groups, most Baptists and many of “Non-Denominational” churches today. At the core of Lutheran statements of belief – in as much as they are to be distinguished from other Christians – is the Augsburg Confession. Any sect generally embracing these texts as a part of their unique identity within the Church Universal may be regarded as Doctrinally Lutheran. The (Eastern) Orthodox Churches, while certainly lauding Lutherans for correcting so many errors previously common in the West, do not embrace the Augsburg Confession and will not be regarded as Doctrinal Lutherans.

Perhaps the best example of a nominally non-Lutheran Group consonant with Lutheran beliefs is the Religious Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers. On one hand, Friends might be expected to be one species of Lutheran, as they arose from the same stock that gave rise to the Doctrinal Lutheran Anglican and Methodist churches. Again, it in consonance with the Augsburg Confession that is most diagnostic here. The Quakers are the best example we have of the notion of the Priesthood of All Believers being put into actual practice. Friends certainly hold to no intermediary between Man and God, to the point of questioning the reality of the actual practice in Protestant denominations where a professional clergy is found. The attitude toward clergy is not dramatically different from the Lutheran church, where lay ministers are also known and Ordination is not regarded as transforming the Pastor into an intermediary between God and Man: the professional clergy of the Lutheran denominations stand for Good Order while the Friends have Business Meeting run by Elders.
In all of the most distinctive characteristics of the Augsburg Confession, it is the Friends who present the best examples: justification by faith and the view of works as good but not as a means of grace (AC IV, VI & XX), the discouraging of Church festivals as not raising one’s standing before God (AC XV), the role of Saints (AC XXI) and the separation of church leaders from positions of political power (AC XXVIII).

It certainly could not be argued that Quakers constitute a Lutheran Synod. Yet, the proposed standard of Doctrinal Lutheran is not a denominational standard: it only requires acceptance of the Augsburg Confession. In the words of Martin Marty, “most of them (the “free spirits”, including Quakers) better conform…to the picture of the Reformation often popularized by latter-day Lutherans and Calvinists. These, and not their more churchly contemporaries, were the real “Bible believing” Christians” (M. Marty, A Short History of Christianity, p.190). It will, of course be observed that Mennonites, Anabaptists and Puritans mentioned in Marty’s passage that constitute the Calvinists, not the Friends: they are the Lutherans. Only an incorrect position concerning Communion divides many Quakers from Lutherans – a view that is common but by no means universal. As Friends do not practice Communion within their own Meetings, many have sought this practice elsewhere, leading to persons (including, it must be said, the present author) who attend Friends Meetings in addition to those of other denominations. Pennsylvania, being home to many Quakers and Lutherans, has produced a number of people who were both. The patriot Thomas Mifflin represented Pennsylvania in the Continental Congress and signed the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. George Clymer, who served in both the Continental and first US Congress and signed both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, was a Quaker / Episcopalian.

Congregational Lutherans are Lutheran chiefly in their association with a Congregation labeled as Lutheran. As such, it forms a more narrow group within the circle of Doctrinal Lutherans. If asked on a survey, they will very likely identify themselves as Lutherans but their primary sense of identity and loyalty is to a specific congregation, more than to the denomination to which that congregation subscribes. As one person in my own congregation once said to me “I would stay with Holy Trinity even if they went Catholic!” This illustrative hyperbole – she is in fact very much a Doctrinal Lutheran – still conveys the notion of her
first loyalty being to the congregation. While she was certainly happiest in an ELCA Lutheran Church, the issues that may divide various Lutheran denominations simply are not critical for her. For her, the “con” in “congregational” defines her church: aloof from questions as who should be ordained or with whom we would share the Good Grace that Christ freely gives to all, her “central issues” center around family and community, her fondest wish to some day see her children married in the same church where they were baptized. Somehow, despite all our arguments and all our clever theology, I often have the disquieting feeling that Jesus is really a Congregational Lutheran after all.

Unlike Congregational Lutherans, a Synodical Lutheran’s identity lies with a specifically named sub-group with the Lutheran community. Rather than simply thinking of themselves as “Lutheran”, such persons will say that they are ELCA or Missouri Synod. As indicated by the name “Synodical”, such persons are aware of the distinctions between various Lutheran denominations and have carefully considered with whom they choose to be “going together”. Having elected to be members of the Lutheran World Federation, the Northern and Southern Districts of the Moravian Church in North America should be regarded as Synodical Lutherans.

Often, a synodical identity extends with subsets within existing denominations. One may describe themselves as ELCA but also being, for example, for or against “Called to Common Mission”. Chiefly associating with a narrowly defined identity, Synodical Lutherans ironically constitute the origin of denominational shifts, mergers and divisions. It is a sense of directional affinity that matters most rather than association with existing or traditional organizations or labels. When the “Synod” of a Synodical Lutheran finds another group going in the same direction, they are like likely to join together. Should a group find their selves going in a different direction that the stream surrounding them, they are apt to “go together” someplace else.

A very brief historical taxonomy of Lutheran Church bodies in North America

Finnish immigration to North America began in large numbers in the 1870’s. Immigration into US essentially halted in 1914 by the war and subsequent changes in immigration laws.
After 1918, Finnish migration was directed toward Canada. Like many immigrants, Finns gravitated towards places like home. A Finnish-speaking Pastor re-located to Calumet, Michigan in 1876. Over its history, language proved to be the driving issue in Finnish organizations, as they did not come to present a very wide geographic diversity. Nine congregations formed the Suomi Synod in Calumet in 1890. A College formed in 1896 and a seminary in 1904. With the closure of immigration to the United States in 1914, the Finnish language gradually became a cultural touchstone rather than a pragmatic necessity. Over time, the adoption of English as the common everyday language removed barriers to working together with other Lutheran groups. Joint missions with the mostly German ULCA began in 1921. Eventually, the Suomi Synod merged with the LCA in 1963, becoming a parent church of the ELCA at it’s formation in 1984. Traditions first established in the Finnish churches have had a considerable impact on the LCA and the ELCA, especially regarding the role of women in the church. While not ordained, women in the Suomi Synod and in the smaller Finnish National E.L.C. were able to vote and hold office in congregations. In the Suomi Synod, Pastor’s wives were known to preach sermons when their husbands were away serving other small far-flung congregations. This became a kind of proving ground for the recognition of women’s spiritual gifts, establishing a policy that is now found throughout the modern organization subsuming the Suomi Synod – the ELCA – but not in other Lutheran denominations unconnected to a Finnish heritage. The small Finnish National E.L.C. merged with the LCMS in 1964 but did not constitute an influential portion of it; women were thus somewhat controversially disenfranchised at the merger.

Norwegian synods in North American began with a wave of immigration in the third quarter of the 19th century. At this time, a number of small, independent synods were established in the upper mid-west, including the Norwegian Synod in Iowa and Wisconsin in 1870. The Norwegian Augustana Synod (NAS) had its roots in Norwegian and Danish members of the Swedish-majority Augustana Synod who became independent in 1870. Other, smaller groups included the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (NDELECA) founded in 1870, the particularly “Low Church” Hauge Synod, started by a lay preacher in 1876, and the Anti-Missourian Brotherhood (ASB) established in 1887.
The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood separated from the Norwegian Synod over issues of doctrine. As the name implies, the concern was over mainstream (rivulet?) Norwegian Synod churches leaning too strongly toward the Missouri Synod. The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood merged with the NAS and the NDELCA only three years after formally separating from the Norwegian Synod. Eventually, the doctrinal disputes were resolved and UNLCA merged with the Norwegian Synod and also the Hague Synod in 1917 to form a single Norwegian liturgical church named the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America (NLCA).

Unification did not last long; it probably never really existed save organizationally. A small group of former Norwegian Synod churches soon separated, holding to what they saw as the “the old doctrine and practice of the Norwegian Synod”. Formally named the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church, they were also known as the Little Norwegian Synod. Once living memory of Norwegian as a liturgical language had largely ceased, the term “Norwegian” was dropped from the formal name in 1957 as the organization became the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Proving to be even more conservative that the LCMS, they have remained independent to this day.

After 1918, as with many other Lutheran churches, Norwegian gradually became a cultural rather than a liturgical language. The NLCA began joint efforts with other Lutheran Groups, eventually participating in the mergers forming the American Lutheran Church in 1960 and the ELCA in 1988. As reflected by the multiplicity of synodical organizations, the Norwegian churches in America have bequeathed a strong tradition of “low church” sensibilities and local congregations that are fairly independent of larger organizations. The view of local and national Synods as common points of mission, not unlike a college or a youth camp, rather than a hierarchical or controlling entity owes much to the Norwegian congregations of the late 19th century.

Similar to the Norwegian church in its “low church” emphasis but differing in having a unified and national character, the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church was centered in Blair, Nebraska. In keeping with its more centrally-organized nature, the Synod developed a strong educational system, establishing Trinity Seminary and Dana College at Blair. The
UDELC did not experience division but, as the distinction of its ethnic language lost its relevance following 1918, it too began to work closely with other Lutheran denominations. “Danish” was dropped from the name in 1940 and the Church participated in the merger forming the American Lutheran Church in 1960. At this time, Trinity Seminary in Blair was also merged into Wartburg Seminary; Dana College remains today under affiliation with the ELCA.

The Augustana Synod was formed by Swedish immigrants in 1860. Augustana in the Latin name for Augsburg Germany, as in “Confessio Augustana”, the Latin name for the Augsburg Confession. This church took on the “High Church” and highly-centralized character of the Church of Sweden. Founded by missionaries sent from Sweden, the Augustana Synod always remained within the Historic Episcopacy, thus establishing the same among a portion of the clergy in successor denominations. Its extensive educational system was very influential in the development of the Augustana Synod. Originally conservative like the larger German-descended Missouri Synod, it became increasingly liberal under the influence of Historical Criticism at its seminary in Rock Island, IL.

As with other North American Lutheran Synods, the Swedish language gradually become a more a cultural touchstone than a practical necessity after 1914. Joint efforts with other Lutheran Synods – especially the more liberal ones - began in the 1920’s, eventually leading to the merger that formed the Lutheran Church in America in 1962. This merger combined the Augustana Synod with the mostly German but more liberal United Lutheran Church in America, the Suomi Synod, and the Danish-descended American Evangelical Lutheran Church. While the Augustana Synod was a smaller group going into the merger, this very organizationally-minded denomination had a considerable impact on the LCA and especially its leadership. This influence later extended to the ELCA following its creation in 1988. Bishop Herbert W. Chilstrom, who served as the last Presiding Bishop of the LCA and the first Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, began in the Augustana Synod.

What is now known as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) was founded in 1847 as the German Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio and other States. This local,
German Lutheran Synod merged with German-language churches in other regions, including the Illinois Synod in 1880 and the Pennsylvania Synod in 1886, while retaining the name Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. After this point, the LCMS was a national church body with a German character, much like the other ethnic Lutheran churches of the time. The early 1900’s brought considerable change to the character, as English became the first language of more and more parishioners. As the historian Harold Schiffman points out (Language Loyalty in the German-American Church, UPenn 1998), LCMS documents are bilingual with German dominance before about 1900 and bilingual with English dominance afterward; English was the primary language in schools as early as 1880. World War I greatly accelerated this process in the German-born LCMS, as members wished to stress the strong American loyalty of the denomination in a time of conflict. The word German, however, remained in the name until 1947, an action subsequently taken by several other ethnically-descended Lutheran church bodies in the 1950’s.

While officially defined by language, the LCMS has always been generally more conservative in stance; more liberally-minded German Lutherans were brought together in the United Lutheran Church in America. However, the conservatism of the LCMS has always been more social and, at times, even political rather than doctrinal. Unlike many of the other ethnic synods begun by missionaries sent from the Mother Country, the LCMS has stood outside the Apostolic Succession. Once the LCMS established itself as the primary national German Lutheran church, subsequent mergers were to occur with smaller much smaller churches having a similar, fairly conservative, stance. The LCMS absorbed the National Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1964 and the Synod of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in 1971.

Even after the ancestral languages ceased to be commonly used in liturgy, the Lutheran denominations continued to serve as cultural institutions closely linked in the hearts of many parishioners. This is reflected in the general establishment of English language by 1920 in denominations that retained the names of their country of origin until the decade beginning in 1948. As language and cultural barriers diminished, cooperation between synods of differing cultural ancestry increased between 1920 and 1960. This laid the groundwork for both divisions within and merges between many of the Lutheran denominations in North America.
With language no longer an issue and cultural barriers diminishing, the mergers of the late 20th century were based on doctrinal characteristics – as were the divisions. The most significant break occurred in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod in 1974. Much the same influences that had led a more unified Augustana synod to adopt a more liberal stance, such a growth of Historical Criticism in Seminaries, were at work in the LCMA as well. This more liberal sub-group within the otherwise increasing conservative LCMS took shape in the Evangelical Lutherans In Mission (ELIM). The issue came to a head when the great majority of the students and many faculty at the LCMS Seminary in Saint Louis, stung by harsh criticism by the corporate church, left the LCMS to form their own seminary. The student of this “Seminary in Exile” or Seminex became very influential in the new synodical organization that arose out of this division, named the American Evangelical Lutheran Church (AELC). The smaller but still very large LCMS was left with a center-right alignment, while the AELC soon merged with the LCA and the ALC to form the center-left ELCA. Because these divisions have been doctrinal and the ECLA is very large, doctrinal distinctions in the ELCA can be very populous and therefore prone to fractionalization. The ELCA today confront issues that are contentious to their center–left constituency (but not to denominations that are either more conservative or more liberal). These include questions concerning homosexuality and the clergy and efforts toward full communion relations with other denominations. This second issue is aggravated by the earlier break from Apostolic Succession inherited from the elements of the LCMS through the AELC, as the Episcopal Church requires that ministers stand within the Historic Episcopacy. In light of these controversies, the possibility of a future division between centrists and more extremely liberal elements of the ELCA can not be ruled out.